

Mourning for a Judaism Being Murdered by Israel

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My heart is broken as I witness the suffering of the Palestinian people and the seeming indifference of Israelis. Tonight (August 4) and tomorrow (August 5), which mark Tisha B'av, the Jewish commemoration of disasters that happened to us through Jewish history, I'm going to be fasting and mourning also for a Judaism being murdered by Israel. No matter who gets blamed for the breakdowns in the cease-fire or for "starting" this latest iteration of a struggle that is at least 140 years old, one of the primary victims of the war between Israel and Hamas is the compassionate and love-oriented Judaism that has held together for several thousand years. Even as Israel withdraws its troops from Gaza, leaving behind immense devastation, over 1,800 dead Gazans, and over four thousand wounded, without adequate medical supplies because of Israel's continuing blockade, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu refuses to negotiate a cease-fire. He is fearful that he would be seen as "weak" if Israel gave way to Gazans' demand for an end to the blockade and the freedom of thousands of Palestinian prisoners kidnapped and held in Israeli jails in violation of their human rights.

Let me explain why Israeli behavior toward Palestinians—not just during this latest assault but also throughout the past decades during which Israel militarily enforced its Occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of food and building materials to Gaza—and the cheerleading for such behavior by Jews around the world is destroying Judaism and creating a new kind of hatred of Jews by people who never before had any issue with Jews (not to mention strengthening the hands of the already existing anti-Semites whose hatred of Jews would continue no matter what Israel or Jews do or do not do).

All my life I've been a champion of Israel, proud of its many accomplishments in science and technology that have benefitted the

world, insistent on the continuing need for the Jewish people to have a state that offers protections from anti-Semitism that has reared its head continuously throughout Christian and Islamic societies, and enjoying the pleasures of long swaths of time in which I could study in Jerusalem and celebrate Shabbat in a city that weekly closed down the hustle and bustle of the capitalist marketplace for a full twenty-five hours. And although as editor of *Tikkun* I printed articles challenging the official story of how Israel came to be, showing its role in forcibly ejecting tens of thousands of Palestinians in 1948, and allowing Jewish terrorist groups under the leadership of (future Israeli prime ministers) Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir to create justified fears that led hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians to flee for their lives. I've also been a severe critic of those who have used criticisms of Israel as a cover for the anti-Semitism inherent in holding Jews to a higher standard than they held their own or other countries. I always told myself that the dominant humanity of the Jewish people and the compassionate strain within Torah would reassert itself once Israel felt secure.

That belief that Israeli goodness would ultimately prevail began to wane in the past eight years when Israel ignored the Saudi Arabian-led peace initiative, refused to stop its expansion of settlements in the West Bank, and imposed an economically crushing blockade on Gaza. Israel did all this in spite of the fact that the Palestinian Authority was promoting nonviolence, actively cooperating with Israeli security forces to prevent any attacks on Israel, and seeking reconciliation and peace.

The Saudi Arabian led peace initiative, which Israel never even responded to, would have granted Israel the recognition it has long sought, ended the hostilities, and given Israel a recognized place in the Middle East (though it had some imperfections, it was a generous first step toward a realistic peace accord with all the Arab states of the region). Even Hamas, whose hateful charter called for Israel's destruction, had decided to accept the reality of Israel's existence, and while unable to embrace its "right" to exist, nevertheless agreed to reconcile with the Palestinian Authority and in that context live within the terms that the Palestinian Authority would negotiate with Israel. Most Israelis ignored all this and were content to ignore the Palestinian suffering under occupation or the Gazans slowly being

reduced to penury from Israel's blockade. Without violence Israelis turned their attention to becoming the Silicon Valley of the Middle East and electing a right-wing government that could charm Israel's American based cheerleaders among Christian Zionists, the American Jewish community, and a super-compliant and fawning U.S. Congress with each major political party competing with the other on which could be seen as most hawkish.

Far from embracing the new possibility for peace that the reconciliation between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas provided—after all, for years the Israeli government had downplayed the importance of negotiating with the Palestinian Authority precisely because a peace agreement with them would still have left Hamas to carry out its war plans—the Israeli government used that as its reason to completely break off the peace negotiations, and then, in an unbelievably cynical move, let the brutal and disgusting murder of three Israeli teens (by a rogue element in Hamas that itself was trying to undermine the reconciliation-with-Israel factions of Hamas by creating new fears in Israel) become the pretext for a wild assault on West Bank civilians, arresting hundreds of Hamas sympathizers, and escalating drone attacks on Hamas operatives inside Gaza. When Hamas responded by starting to send its missiles (which were rendered ineffective and hence mostly symbolic by Israel's Iron Shield) toward civilian targets in Israel, the Netanyahu government used that as its excuse to launch a brutal assault on Gaza.

But it is the brutality of that assault which finally has broken me into tears and heartbreak. While claiming that it is only interested in uprooting tunnels that could be used to attack Israel, the Israeli Defense Forces have engaged in the same criminal behavior that the world condemns in other struggles around the world: the intentional targeting of civilians (the same crime that Hamas has been engaged in over the years in its bombing of Sdeyrot and its current targeting of Israeli population centers, thankfully unsuccessfully, which correctly has earned it the label as a terrorist organization).

Using the excuse that Hamas is using civilians as “human shields” and placing its war material in civilian apartments—a claim that a UN human rights investigatory commission found groundless when Israel used it the last time it invaded Gaza in 2008-2009 and engaged in

similar levels of killing civilians—Israel has managed to kill over 1,500 Palestinians and wound over 8,000 thousand more.

The stories that have emerged from eye-witness accounts of hundreds of children being killed by Israel's indiscriminate destructiveness, the shelling of United Nations schools and public hospitals, and finally the destruction of Gaza's water and electricity thus guaranteeing deaths from typhoid and other diseases as well as widespread hunger among the million and a half Gazans (most of whom have had nothing to do with Hamas), highlights to the world an Israel that is rivaling some of the most oppressive and brutal regimes in the contemporary world. Israel does not intentionally target civilians, but it has full reason to know that its targets will inevitably kill huge numbers of civilians. We who rejected the excuse that Viet Cong were hiding in Vietnamese villages as the rationale for U.S. forces to wipe out hundreds of such villages and ultimately cause millions of Vietnamese deaths in the Vietnam war will not accept a similar rationale for what is a de facto Israeli war on Palestinian civilians. Fine, destroy tunnels potentially used to infiltrate Israel; but it is a crime against humanity to destroy housing compounds, schools, and hospitals.

In my book *Embracing Israel/Palestine* (www.tikkun.org/eip) I argue that both Israelis and Palestinians are victims of post-traumatic stress disorder. I have a great deal of compassion for both peoples. Members of the Jewish people have been the victims of 1,600 years of oppression in European countries and hundreds of years of apartheid-like conditions in Muslim countries. We have faced a world that mostly refused to help us or open its doors to us as refugees when we were the victims of genocide. The traumas of that past still shape the consciousness of many Jews today. Jews deserve compassion and need healing. Similarly, the Palestinian people's expulsion from their homes in the process of the founding of the State of Israel, remembered as *Al Nakba* (the great catastrophe), continues to shape the consciousness of many Palestinians sixty-six years later. But those traumas don't exonerate Israel's behavior or that of Hamas, though they are relevant for those of us seeking a path to social healing and transformation.

Yet that healing is impossible until those who are victims of PTSD are

willing to work on overcoming it.

And this is precisely where the American Jewish community and Jews around the world have taken a turn that is disastrous—turning the Israeli nation state into “the Jewish state” and making Israel into an idol to be worshipped rather than a political entity like any other political entity, with strengths and deep flaws, a political entity which should be held to account for its systematic violations of human rights.

Sadly, too many Jews relate to Israel not as a state but as some holy reality. Despairing of spiritual salvation after God failed to show up and save us from the Holocaust, increasing numbers of Jews have abandoned the religion of compassion and identification with the most oppressed that was championed by our Biblical prophets. Instead, they’ve come to worship power and to rejoice in Israel’s ability to become the most militarily powerful state in the Middle East. If a Jew today goes into any synagogue in the United States or around the world and says, “I don’t believe in God or Torah and I don’t follow the commandments,” most will still welcome her in and urge her to become involved. But if the same person says, “I don’t support the State of Israel,” she is likely to be labeled a “self-hating Jew” or an anti-Semite to be scorned and dismissed. As Aaron said of the golden calf in the desert, “These are your Gods, O Israel.” The idolatrous view that God is working through the Israel Defense Forces has led some Jews to believe that this powerful army is “the most moral army on earth,” and no amount of senseless killing of civilians breaks through this religious worship.

The worship of the state makes it necessary for Jews to turn Judaism into an auxiliary of ultra-nationalist blindness. Every act of the State of Israel against the Palestinian people is seen as sanctioned by God. Each Sabbath Jews in synagogues around the world are offered prayers for the well-being of the State of Israel but not for our Arab cousins. The very suggestion that we should be praying as well for the Palestinian people’s welfare is seen as heresy and proof of being “self-hating Jews.”

The worship of power is precisely what Judaism came into being to challenge. We were the slaves, the powerless, and though the Torah

talks of God using a strong arm to redeem the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, it simultaneously insists, over and over again, that when Jews go into their promised land in Canaan (now Palestine) they must “love the stranger/the other,” have only one law for the stranger *and* for the native born, and warns “do not oppress the stranger/the other.” Remember, Torah reminds us, “that you were strangers/the other in the land of Egypt” and “you know the heart of the stranger.” Later sources in Judaism even insist that a person without compassion who claims to be Jewish cannot be considered Jewish. A spirit of generosity is so integral to Torah consciousness that when Jews are told to let the land lie fallow once every seven years (the societal-wide Sabbatical Year), they must allow that which grows spontaneously from past plantings to be shared with the other/the stranger.

The Jews are not unique in this. The basic reality is that most of humanity has always heard a voice inside themselves telling them that the best path to security and safety is to love others and show generosity, and a counter voice that tells us that the only path to security is domination and control over others. This struggle between the voice of fear and the voice of love, the voice of domination/power-over and the voice of compassion, and empathy and generosity, have played out throughout history and shape contemporary political debates around the world.

Almost every single one of us hears both voices. We are often torn between them, oscillating in our communal policies and our personal behavior between these two worldviews and ways of engaging others.

As the competitive and me-first ethos of the capitalist marketplace has grown increasingly powerful and reflected in the culture and worldviews of the contemporary era, more and more people bring the worldview of fear, domination, and manipulation of others into personal lives, teaching people the rationality of the marketplace with its injunction to see other human beings primarily in terms of how they can serve their own needs, rather than as deserving care and respect just for who they are. This ethos has weakened friendships and created the instability in family life that the Right has so effectively manipulated (a theme I develop most fully in my 2006

national best-seller *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right* based on a study I conducted during my years as a psychotherapist and principal investigator of an National Institute of Mental Health study of stress and the psychodynamics of daily life in Western societies). Every religious and secular worldview, including Marxism, feminism, liberalism, psychoanalysis, and the various ideologies that predominate in universities hiding under the guise of a pseudo-scientism, has had partisans of both worldviews contending with each other—because every religion and secular worldview reflects this conflict within the psyche of the human beings who have articulated them.

No wonder that Jews and Judaism have had these conflicting streams within our religion as well. Those compilers of the Torah who heard God's voice commanding the Israelites to wipe out the inhabitants of the promised land in order to start afresh were explained away some 2,000 years ago by subsequent interpreters who emphasized that those peoples referenced in Torah no longer existed, so the command to love the "other" was the only relevant guide for our lives as Jews. Yet subsequent generations facing the frequent assaults on Jews by majority populations in the Diaspora found it hard to keep the command to "love the stranger/other." Even as those others were killing, raping, and robbing them, some sought to reinterpret the word "stranger/other" (the Hebrew word *ger*) in a more tame way—saying it only meant "convert to Judaism" (an interpretation that flew in the face of the Torah statement "remember you were the *ger* in the land of Egypt).

In the two thousand years of relative powerlessness when Jews were the oppressed minorities of the western and Islamic societies, the validation of images of a powerful God who could fight for the oppressed Jews was a powerful psychological boon to offset the potential internalizing of the demonization that we faced from the majority cultures. And the practice of demeaning the "other" while embracing a notion of Jews as "chosen by God," rather than responding with love to our oppressors, was arguably a brilliant psychological strategy for refusing to internalize the demeaning rhetoric of our oppressors and fall victim to self-hatred.

But in this moment, when Jews enjoy military power in Israel, as well

as economic and political power in the United States and to some extent in many other Western societies, one would have expected that the theme of love and generosity, always a major voice even in a Jewish people that were being brutalized, would now emerge as the dominant theme of the Judaism of the twenty-first century. Trusting not in love and kindness and the possibility of transforming (*tikkun*-ing) our world, but instead believing that we must always be on the defensive and rely not in trusting our fellow human being but relying on power and military might—this is the tragic victory of Hitler over the consciousness of the Jewish people who are increasingly unwilling to continue to embrace the worldview of hope and possibility that Judaism originally emerged to affirm and popularize.

No wonder, then, that I'm heartbroken to see the Judaism of love and compassion being dismissed as "unrealistic" by so many of my fellow Jews and rabbis. Wasn't the central message of Torah that the world was ruled by a force that made possible the transformation from "that which is" to "that which can and should be"? And wasn't our task to teach the world that nothing is fixed, that even the mountains can skip like young rams and the seas can flee before the triumph of God's justice in the world?

Instead of preaching this hopeful message, too many rabbis and rabbinical institutions are preaching a Judaism that places more hope in the might of the Israeli army than in the capacity of human beings (including Palestinians) to transform their perception of "the other" and overcome their fears. Even in the darkest days of our oppression, most Jewish thinkers believed that all human beings were created in the image of God and hence were capable of transformation to once again become embodiments of love and generosity. As the prayer for Yom Kippur says, "Till the day of their death, YOU (God) wait for them, that perhaps they might return, and YOU will immediately receive them."

In contrast, today's rabbis are more like the set of past-era Protestant theologians who used to emphasize human sinfulness as almost impossible to overcome and hence rejected any hope of social transformation. They scoff at the possibility which we at *Tikkun* magazine and our Network of Spiritual Progressives have been preaching (not only for the Middle East, but for the United States as

well) that if we act from a loving and generous place, seeking to overcome behaviors that were previously perceived as disrespectful and humiliating, that the icebergs of anger and hate (some of which our behavior helped to create) can melt away and people's hearts can once again turn toward love and justice for all. Our call for the United States to develop a Global Marshall Plan and a strategy of generosity toward the developing world (see www.tikkun.org/gmp) and for Israel to develop a Marshall Plan to rebuild Gaza and the West Bank so that it can easily accommodate the millions of Palestinians still stuck in refugee camps around the Arab world get ignored because in both the United States and Israel the belief in "homeland security through domination" leads people to dismiss the religious call (in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, as well in some secular humanist communities) for security through generosity and open-hearted reconciliation. I've applied these principles to develop a detailed plan for what a peaceful resolution of the conflict would look like in *Embracing Israel/Palestine*.

In an America which at this very moment has its president calling to send tens of thousands of child refugees back to the situations they risked their lives to escape, in an America which refused to provide Medicare for all, and in an America which serves the interests of its richest 1 percent while largely ignoring the needs of its large working middle class, these ideas may sound naively utopian. But for Judaism, belief in God was precisely a belief that love and justice could and should prevail, and that our task is to embody that message in our communities and promote that message to the world.

It is this love, compassion, justice, and peace-oriented Judaism that the State of Israel is murdering. The worshippers of Israel have fallen into a deep cynicism about the possibility of the world that the prophets called for in which nation shall not lift up the sword against each other and they will no longer learn war, and everyone will live in peace. True, that world is not already here, but the Jewish people's task was to teach people that this world could be brought into being, and that each step we take is either a step toward that world or a step away from it. The Israel worshippers are running away from this world of love, making it far less possible. And yet they call their behavior "Judaism" and Israel "the Jewish state." If Judaism's call for a world based on social justice, peace, and love for "the other" is dismissed

as impossible under current conditions, the least we could ask of Israel is that it describe itself as “a State with many Jews” rather than as “a Jewish state” since the latter implies some connection to Judaism and its prophetic tradition.

No wonder, then, that I mourn for the Judaism of love, kindness, peace, and generosity that Israel worshippers dismiss as utopian fantasy. To my fellow Jews, I issue the following invitation: use Tisha B'av (the traditional fast-day mourning the destruction of Jewish life in the past, and starting Monday night August 4 till dark on August 5) to mourn for the Judaism of love and generosity that is being murdered by Israel and its worshippers around the world, the same kind of idol-worshippers who, pretending to be Jewish but actually assimilated into the world of power, helped destroy our previous two Jewish commonwealths and our Temples of the past.

I urge Jews who agree with the perspective in this article to go to High Holiday services this year and publicly insist that the synagogue services include repentance for the sins of the Jewish people in giving blind support to immoral policies of the State of Israel. Don't sit quietly while the rabbis or others give talks implying that Israel is wholly righteous and that the Palestinians are the equivalent of Hitler or some “evil other.” Pass out to people the High Holiday “For Our Sins” workbook that *Tikkun* has developed and that will be **on our website** in early September. Write to your synagogue beforehand to ask them to include that list of sins among those that are traditionally read on Yom Kippur. That reading will be certain to generate a new aliveness in your synagogue and make Yom Kippur more spiritually real and deep than passively sitting through a service that is ignoring some of the central issues for which we should be atoning. Whether or not you go to synagogue on the High Holidays, please donate to *Tikkun* to keep our voice alive (the organized Jewish community and many Jews who are liberal on every other issue still refuse to support or read *Tikkun* precisely because we touch this issue—just ask the social justice-oriented Jewish groups you know about why they are not speaking up about Israel and you'll see why it is so important to support *Tikkun*). And please: **join** our interfaith and secular-humanist-welcoming **Network of Spiritual Progressives** and help us create local chapters to get out the message that the Judaism being preached in many synagogues is antithetical to the highest values of

our people and our Jewish tradition (even while acknowledging that there have always been within that tradition contradictory and pro-domination voices as well).

Please don't be silent when rabbis refuse to acknowledge their idol-worship and their blind support for Israeli policies. Insist that they take into account when judging Palestinians the psychologically and ethically destructive impact of living under Occupation. Ask them to choose between demanding that Israel immediately help the Palestinian people to create their independent state without an occupying Israeli army or demanding that Israel give all the Palestinians the same rights that Americans fought for in our own revolution and that we demanded for Africans in South Africa and African Americans in the South—one person, one vote (in the Israeli Knesset elections).

We may have to renew our Judaism by creating a liberatory, emancipatory, and transformative love-oriented Judaism outside the synagogues and traditional institutions, because inside the existing Jewish community the best we can do is repeat what the Jewish exiles in Babylonia said in Psalm 137, "How can we sing the songs of the Transformative Power YHVH in a strange land?" And let us this year turn Yom Kippur into a time of repentance for the sins of our people who have given Israel a blank check and full permission to be brutal in the name of Judaism and the Jewish people (even as we celebrate those Jews with the courage to publicly critique Israel in a loving but stern way). Doing so does not mean obscuring the immorality of Hamas' behavior. But the High Holidays is meant to be a time to focus on what *our* sins are, not the sins of others. Isn't it time that we stopped hiding behind the distortions in others to avoid our own distortions?

For our non-Jewish allies, the following plea: do not let the organized Jewish community intimidate you with charges that any criticism of Israel's brutality toward the Palestinian people proves that you are anti-Semites. Stop allowing your very justified guilt at the history of oppression your ancestors enacted on Jews to be the reason you fail to speak out vigorously against the current immoral policies of the State Israel. The way to become real friends of the Jewish people is to side with those Jews who are trying to get Israel back on track

toward its highest values, knowing full well that there is no future for a Jewish state surrounded by a billion Muslims except through friendship and cooperation.

The temporary alliance of brutal dictatorships in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and various Arab emirates that give Israel support against Hamas will ultimately collapse, but the memory of humiliation at the hands of the State of Israel will not, and Israel's current policies will endanger Jews both in the Middle East and around the world for many decades after the people of Israel have regained their senses. Real friends don't let their friends pursue a self-destructive path, so it's time for you too to speak up and to support those of us in the Jewish world who are champions of peace and justice, and who will not be silent in the face of the destruction of Judaism. One concrete step: **join the Network of Spiritual Progressives** and help us get the messages I'm articulating here into the public arena in the U.S. With 57 percent of the American public polling support for Israel's assault on Gaza, the most important task we have is to shift mass consciousness toward a more nuanced position that is both pro-Israel *and* pro-Palestine.

And, on the other hand, to our non-Jewish friends, please don't be angry at all Jews for the distorted behavior of a state that calls itself "the Jewish State" and that acts in an arrogant, provocative, and disrespectful way, making itself the neighborhood bully of the Middle East. That state did not consult most Jews about its policies. And please recognize that the anti-Semitic outbreaks that we've seen recently in France, Belgium, and other European countries are no different than other kinds of racism: blaming all people of a particular group for evil behavior of some.

And that gets to my last point. Younger Jews, like many of their non-Jewish peers, are becoming increasingly alienated from Israel and from the Judaism that too many Jews claim to be the foundation of this supposedly Jewish state. They see Israel as what Judaism is in practice, not knowing how very opposite its policies are to the traditional worldviews most Jews have embraced through the years. It is these coming generations of young people—whose parents claim to be Jewish but celebrate the power of the current State of Israel and never bother to critique it when it is acting immorally (as it is today in

Gaza)—who will leave Judaism in droves, making it all the more the province of the Israel-worshippers with their persistent denial of the God of love and justice and their embrace of a God of vengeance and hate. I won't blame them for that choice, but I wish they knew that there is a different strand of Judaism that has been the major strand for much of Jewish history, and that it needs their active engagement in order to reestablish it as the twenty-first-century continuation of the Jewish tradition. That I have to go to non-Jewish sources to seek to have this message circulated is a further testimony to how much there is to mourn over the dying body of the Judaism of love, pleading for Jews who privately feel the way I do to come out of their closets and help us rebuild the Jewish world in which *tikkun* (healing and transformation) becomes the first agenda item.

Above all else, I grieve for all the unnecessary suffering on this planet, including the Israeli victims of terrorism, the Palestinian victims of Israeli terror and repression, the victims of America's misguided wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the victims of America's apparently endless war on terrorism, the victims of so many other struggles around the world, and the less visible but real victims of a global capitalist order in which, according to the UN, between 8,000 and 10,000 children under the age of five die every day from malnutrition or diseases related to malnutrition. And yet I affirm that there is still the possibility of a different kind of world, if only enough of us would believe in it and then work together to create it.

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